

MOXON'S MAST

... By ...
Ambrose Bierce

"ARE you serious?—do you really believe that a machine thinks?"
I got no immediate reply; Moxon was apparently intent upon the coals in the grate, touching them dextrously here and there with the fire-maker—till they signified a cease of this attention by a brighter glow.

Presently he said: "What is a 'machine'?" The word has been variously defined. Here is one definition from a popular dictionary: "Any instrument or organization by which power is applied and made effective, or a desired effect produced." Well, then, is not a man a machine? And you will admit that he thinks—or thinks he thinks."

MOXON was unusually animated. As he passed I heard in an adjoining room known to me as his "machine-shop," which no one but himself was permitted to enter, a singular thinking sound, as of someone pondering upon a table with an open hand. Moxon heard it at the same moment and, evidently agitated, rose and hurriedly passed into the room whence it came.

I thought it odd that anyone else should be there, and my interest in his friend—with doubtless a touch of unaccountable curiosity—led me to listen intently, not only to his words, but all at the keyhole. There were convulsed sobs, as if of struggle or rattle, the door shook, I distinctly heard heart beating and a hoarse whisper which said, "Damn you!" Then all was silent, and presently Moxon reappeared and said, with a rather sorry smile,

"Pardon me for leaving you so abruptly. I have a machine in there that lost its temper and cut rough."

Fringing my eyes steadily upon his left cheek, which was traversed by four parallel excoriations showing blood, I said:

"How would it do to trim its hair?"

I could have spared myself the

least; he gave it no attention, but scolded himself in the chair that he had left and resumed the interrupted monologue as if nothing had occurred.

"Doubtless you do not hold with those I need not name (to a man of your reading), who have taught that all matter is sentient,

and that every atom is a living, feeling, conscious being. I do not know if you happen to recall Heron Spenser's 'The Machine' (I read it thirty years ago). He may have altered it somewhat since I read it, but in all that time I have been unable to think of a single word that could probably be changed or added or removed. It seems to me not only the best

"Moxon tried to throw himself backwards out of reach, but he was too late."

Classic Short Story

definition, but the only possible one.

"Life," he says, "is a definite combination of heterogeneous changes, both simultaneous and successive, in correspondence with external circumstances and sequences."

MOXON was silent for a long time, staring absently into the fire. It was growing late and I thought it time to be going, but somehow I did not like the notion of leaving him at isolated home, all alone except for the presence of some person of whose nature my conjectures could go no further than that it was, unfortunately, perhaps motion. Leaving toward him and looking earnestly into his eyes while making a motion with my hand toward the door of his workshop, I said:

"Moxon, whom have you in there?"

Somewhat to my surprise he laughed lightly and answered without hesitation:

"Nobody; the incident that you have in mind was caused by my folly in leaving the machine idle, in action with nothing to act upon, while I undertook the interminable task of establishing your understanding. Do you happen to know that Consciousness is the creature of Rhythms?"

"Oh, better than both," I replied, rising and having hold of my overcoat. "I'm going to wish you good night, and I'll bid the hope that the machine which you undervalue, left in action, will have her gloves on next time, on think it needful to slip her."

Without waiting to observe the effect of my shot I left the house. Rain was falling and the dark.

My interest in the story beyond the crest of a hill toward which I stepped, in the sky beyond, was increased by the appearance of a phyllopoia, a sidewalk, a grassy, merry, joyous street. I could see the faint glow of the city's lights, but actual light would be visible but a single window of Moxon's house.

It glowed with what seemed to me a mysterious and fateful meaning. I knew I was an ignorant aperture in my friend's "machine-shop," and I had little doubt that he had required the studies interrupted by his duties as my instructor in mechanical Consciousness and the fatherhood of Rhythms.

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WHY, here (I thought) is something upon which I found a philosophy. If Consciousness is the product of Rhythms all things are conscious for all have motion, and all motion is rhythmic. I wondered if Moxon knew the significance and breadth of his thought—the scope of his momentous generalization, or had he arrived at his philosophical faith by the fortuitous and uncertain road of observation.

That faith was then new to me, and all Moxon's expounding had failed to make me a convert, but now it seemed as if a great light shone about me, like that which fell upon Saul of Tarsus, and out there in the storm and darkness and solitude I experienced what Lawes calls "The endless variety and excitement of philosophy thought."

I exulted in a new extent of knowledge, a new pride of reason. My feet seemed hardly to touch the earth, it was as if I were uplifted and borne "up" the air by invisible wings.

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YIELDING to an impulse to seek further light from him whom I now recognized as my master and guide, I had unconsciously turned about, and almost before I was aware of having done so found myself again at Moxon's door. I was disheveled with rain, but felt no discomfort.

Unable in my excitement, to find the door bell I impulsively tried the handle. It turned, and entering I murmured the stairs to the room that I had so recently left.

All was dark and silent. Moxon, as I had supposed, was in the adjoining room—the "machine-shop." Groggling along the wall until I found the communication door, I knocked loudly several times, but got no response, which I attributed to the uproar outside, for the wind was blowing a gale and dashing the rain against the thin walls in sheets. The drumming upon the shingle roof against the uncurled room was loud and incessant.

I had never been invited into the "machine-shop," had indeed been deemed undesirable, as had all others, with one exception, a skilled metal worker, of whom no one knew anything except that his name was Hylas and his habit silence. But in my spiritual exaltation discipline and civility were alike forgotten. I opened the door. What I saw took all phyllopoia plural speculation out of me in short order.

Moxon sat facing me at the farther side of a small table, upon which a single candle made all the light that was in the room. Opposite him, his back toward me, sat another person. On the table between the two was a chessboard.

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the men were playing. I knew little of chess, but as only a few pieces were on the board it was obvious that the game was near its close.

Moxon was intensely interested not so much, it seemed to me, in the game as in his antagonist, upon whom he had fixed so intent a look that, standing though I did directly in the line of his vision, I was altogether unserved. His face was ghastly white, and his eyes differed like diamonds. Of his antagonist I had only a back view, but that was sufficient; I should not have cared to see his face.

He was apparently not more than five feet in height, with proportions suggesting those of a gorilla—a tremendous breadth of shoulders, thick, short neck, and broad, squat head, which had a lustrous growth of black hair and was topped with a crimson fez.

A tupe of the same color, belted tightly to the waist, reached the mid—apparently, I had—upon which he sat; his legs and feet were not seen. His left forearm appeared to rest in his lap; he moved his pieces with his right hand, which seemed disproportionately long.

I had shrunk back and now stood a little to one side of the doorway, and in shadow. If Moxon had looked farther than the face of his opponent he could have observed nothing now, except that the door was open. Something forbade me either to enter or to retire. I felt, I know not how it came—that I was in the presence of an imminent tragedy and might serve my friend by remaining. With scarcely conscious rebellion against the indicatory of the set I remained.

The play was rapid. Moxon hardly glanced at the board before making his move, and to my unskilled eye seemed to move the piece most convenient to his hand, his motions in doing so being quick, nervous and lacking in precision.

The response of his antagonist, while equally prompt in the inception, was made with a slow, uniform, mechanical and, I thought, somewhat theatrical movement of the arm that was a sore trial to my patience. There was something unceremonious about it and I caught myself shuddering. But I was wet and cold.

TWO or three times after moving a piece the stranger slightly jerked his head. At each time I observed that Moxon shifted his hands. All at once the thought came to me that he was a machine—an automaton chess-player. The conclusion I reached that Moxon had once spoken to me of having invented such a piece of mechanism, though I did not understand that it had actually been constructed.

Was all his talk about the con-

sciousness and intelligence of machines merely a prelude to eventual exhibition of this device—only a trick to intensify the effect of his mechanical action upon me in my ignorance of its secret?

A line cut, this, of all my intellectual transports—my "endless variety and excitement of philosophic thought?" I was about to retire in disgust when something occurred to hold my curiosity. I observed a string of the thing's great shoulders, as if it were irritated, and so natural was this—so entirely human—that in my new view of the matter it startled me. Nor was that all, for a moment later it struck the table sharply with its clenched hand. At that gesture Moxon seemed even more startled than I; he pushed his chair a little backward, as in alarm.

Presently Moxon, whose play it was, raised his hand high above the board, pointed upon one of his pieces like a sparrow-hawk, and with the exclamation "check-mate!" rose quickly to his feet and stepped behind his chair. The automaton sat motionless.

The wind had now gone down, but I heard, at lessening intervals and progressively louder, the rumble and roll of thunder. In the pauses between, I now became conscious of a low humming or buzzing which, like the thunder, grew momentarily louder and more distinct. It seemed to come from the body of the automaton, and was unmistakably a whirling of wheels. It gave me the impression of a disordered mechanism which had escaped the repressive and regulating action of some controlling part—an effect such as might be expected if a pawl should be jostled from the teeth of a ratchet-wheel.

But before I had time for much conjecture as to its nature my attention was taken by the strange motions of the automaton itself. A slight but continuous convulsion appeared to have possession of it. Its body and head it shook like a man with palsy or an ague chill, and the motion suggested every moment until the entire figure was in violent agitation.

Suddenly it sprang to its feet, and with a movement almost too quick for the eye to follow shot forward across table and chair, with both arms thrust forth to their full length—the posture and lunge of a diver. Moxon tried to throw himself backward out of reach, but he was too late; I saw the horrible thing's hands clasp upon his throat, his own clutch its wrists. Then the table was turned, the candle thrown to the floor and extinguished. All was black, dark. But the noise of the struggle was tremendous, distinct, and most terrible of all were the rasping, squeaking sounds made by the strangled man's efforts to breathe.

Guided by the infernal humbly, I sprang to the rescue of my friend, but had hardly taken a

stride in the darkness when the whole room blazed with a blinding white light that burned into my brain and heart and memory a vivid picture of the combatants on the floor. Moxon underneath, his throat still in the clutch of those iron hands, his head forced backwards, his eyes protruding, his mouth wide open and his tongue thrust out, and—horrible contrast!—upon the pointed face of his assassin an expression of tranquil and profound thought, as in the solution of a problem in chess? This, I observed, then all was blackness and silence.

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THREE days later I recovered consciousness in a hospital. As the memory of that tragic night slowly evolved in my ailing brain I recognized in my attendant Moxon's confidential workman, Haley, (responding to a look, he approached, smiling. "Tell me about it," I managed to say, faintly—"all about it?"

"Certainly," he said: "you were carried unconscious from a burning house—Moxon's. Nobody knows how you came to be there. You may have to do a little re-plotting. The origin of the fire is a bit mysterious, too. My own notion is that the house was struck by lightning."

And Moxon?

"He died yesterday—what was left of him." Apparently this reticent person could unfold himself on occasion. When imparting shocking intelligence to the sick he was affable enough. After some moments of the keener mental suffering I ventured to ask another question. "Who rescued me?"

"Well, if that interests you—I did."

"Thank you, Mr. Haley, and may God bless you for it. Did you rescue, also, that 'strange product of your skill, the automaton chess-player that snatched its inventor?"

The man was silent a long time, looking away from me. Presently he turned and gravely said: "Do you know that?"

"No," I replied; "I saw it done."

That was many years ago. If asked today I should answer less confidently.

ANOTHER AMBUSH: HERCE STORY NEXT WEEK.